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Mayor Bill Finch, City of Bridgeport  
Testimony on House Bill 6385

Chairs Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, Vice Chairs Senator Fonfara, Representative McCrory and Ranking Members Senator Boucher and Representative Giuliano and members of the Committee, my name is Bill Finch and I am the Mayor of the City of Bridgeport. I am pleased to offer testimony on House Bill 6385, An Act Implementing the Budget Recommendations of the Governor.

I offer testimony on House Bill 6385 because it includes an important step towards fixing our school funding system. Too many districts and students in our state are funded unfairly under the current system. In my city of Bridgeport, nearly all students (98%) qualify for free or reduced price lunch and they bring significant learning challenges with them to school. Yet, a student in Bridgeport Public schools only receives about \$8,600 in state aid, while similar students in New Haven receive about \$9,000 from the state and students in Hartford receive almost \$11,000.

This is not because Bridgeport has a greater ability for education locally: my city has only 30% of the state median taxable wealth per pupil. In fact, other cities, with a greater tax base and fewer students in need currently receive *more* per pupil than Bridgeport. This situation defies logic, hurts students and must be fixed now.

We have made some progress recently. Student performance in Bridgeport is improving significantly faster than the state average. There are always bright spots, but we have a long, long way to go to put our children on a path to success. For example, in Bridgeport, only 1 in 4 fourth graders performed at grade level (at the goal level) in Reading on the 2010 CMT. This is devastating news and we will work hard to fix it. These educational challenges, compounded by our tough budget times, are forcing my city and others like it to make hard choices. We cannot afford to keep doing business as usual while our students slip through our fingers.

That is why I am pleased that House Bill 6385, An Act Implementing the Budget Recommendations of the Governor, recommends a Task Force to study issues relating to our school funding system, with the requirement of developing a new system by the end of this year.

We've all seen a lot of task forces come and go. In fact, the state's Ad Hoc Committee to Study Choice and ECS funding just spent almost a year on this to no avail. If we're going to take another year to study something that we all know is so clearly broken—if we're really going to be ready to implement a new funding system next year—there are two things we have to be sure to do.

First, we need to have a crystal clear charge for this Task Force. For example, the Task Force must be required to identify a solution that fixes the inconsistencies of our current system so that cities and towns with similar wealth receive similar state aid. It also needs to ensure students

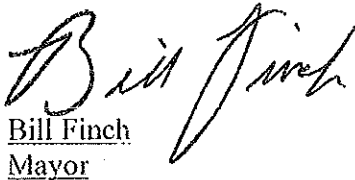
with similar learning needs receive consistent state funding, regardless of the public school they attend. The system also needs to encourage a common chart of accounts so that we can track and compare spending and budgets more accurately, and share best practices across cities and towns.

Second, it's critical that we begin to test and debate specific proposals for fixing our school funding right away, during the current legislative session. The more work we do right now to work through the interests of all those concerned with our school finance system, across the state, the more quickly we can move forward with a workable solution in the year to come.

Furthermore, it's important to remember that it's not necessarily about more money, it's about spending the money we have more fairly. Thirty-four percent of Bridgeport's land is tax exempt; Bridgeport, Hartford and New Haven are three of the smallest cities in the nation in an extremely tax dependent state. We have to mitigate against these home rule deficiencies if we are to make progress along this front, and I believe this bill gives us the opportunity to do so.

Bridgeport schools, like many across the state, continue to struggle to solve our most pressing educational challenges. We are doing so under a school funding system that is fundamentally broken. We must seize the opportunity to fix this problem now. Our children cannot wait.

Sincerely,



Bill Finch  
Mayor